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Cuban fumbles try at spying; was too straightforward, U.S. says

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MIAMI — As a spy, Mario Monzon Barata is a flop.

In disgrace, he packed his bags last week and caught a flight home to Havana.

To the U.S. government, Monzon was just another secret agent tripped up in the world of espionage. To the Cuban government, he was an honest diplomat wrongly accused.

The undoing of Mario Monzon Barata began one day in June when he dialed the telephone number for Microdyne Corp. in Ocala, Fla. Because he spoke Spanish, sales clerk Tina Lopez got on the line.

He was less than candid. He didn't tell anyone he held the position of second secretary at Fidel Castro's mission to the United Nations.

It was not the first time Monzon had ordered from Microdyne, a company that makes top-secret material for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration and the Pentagon.

In a businesslike manner, Monzon rattled off model numbers for 17 satellite receivers. They contain circuits made nowhere else in the world, the company says.

Monzon wanted them shipped to his apartment in New York City. Microdyne insisted he pay in advance.

On Friday, June 26, his cashier's check for \$39,000 arrived in the mail. Louis Wolcott, president of Microdyne, spotted the check. An attached letter in Spanish caught his eye.

Wolcott pays attention to such details. His fear, he said, is industrial espionage.

The FBI worries about espionage, too, the foreign kind. Somehow, it figured out what was happening in Ocala. An FBI agent telephoned Wolcott at home that weekend to tell him that Monzon was a Cuban diplomat.

Wolcott didn't need to be told that such companies as Microdyne are targets of the Soviet Union's intelligence service, the KGB, and that the KGB is very friendly with Cuba.

In Washington, State Department officials pondered the situation.

Monzon was no stranger to FBI counterintelligence agents. They had shadowed him in Manhattan, believing he worked for the General Directorate of Intelligence, Cuba's CIA. They also believed that they knew his mission: recruitment of sources among the Cuban exiles and acquisition of high-technology equipment.

One administration official said Monzon had successfully purchased "hundreds of thousands of dollars of equipment" since his arrival from Cuba in September 1980, but "some of the shipments got away from us."

Now, the United States had several options. It could pretend nothing had happened.

"You are much better off knowing who the other sides' agents are," said one federal source, "because then you are able to keep track of them."

The other options were to quietly stop the shipment and send Monzon packing.

This wasn't the first time the U.S. government faced this situation with a Cuban diplomat. Seventeen months ago, it expelled Ricardo Escartin.

Escartin had traveled throughout the United States, inviting business executives to visit Cuba and cut lucrative deals. His pitch was simple: American businessmen could evade the embargo by selling their goods to Cuban-controlled dummy corporations in Canada, Panama, Jamaica or Czechoslovakia.

It was because of people like Escartin that the U.S. Customs Service launched Operation Exodus — reversing the agency's traditional focus of examining what came into a country and looking to see what had left the United States.

So far, Exodus has produced seizures of computer terminals in Boston, microwave equipment in New York and minicomputers in West Germany.

California is the high-tech capital of the nation. But because of companies like Microdyne, there are Exodus agents at work in Florida, too.

In the Monzon case, the United States devised a strategy. They told Wolcott he should ship the equipment as ordered.

So, on Thursday, July 2, Microdyne addressed a 300-pound package to Monzon's apartment in New York and summoned United Parcel Service. As the UPS truck departed from Microdyne's lot, a Customs vehicle swung in behind and followed it to a warehouse in Orlando, Fla.

In Orlando the next day, Monzon's package was seized under a search warrant. In New York, the State Department declared Monzon and his secretary persona non grata.

In Washington, Cuban diplomats said they were shocked. They argued that the Microdyne equipment was just run-of-the-mill receivers used to pick up cable television signals.

Wolcott disagreed. "It is high technology," he said. "It has no military application, but it does have circuits I'm sure they don't have in Cuba or Russia."

The expulsion leaves one question: If Monzon was a trained spy, why was he so blatant — using his real name and leaving behind an obvious paper trail with his check?

An administration official said Monzon could afford to be brazen because the United States "is a big country, an open country without a lot of controls" and he could get away with it. "He knew what he was doing very well."

Back in Ocala, Wolcott also knew what to do. "I put the check in the bank," he said.